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2020-06

Mickwitz , Å , Cvetanovic , D , Lehtonen , H & Toom , A 2020 , ' Preparing for the modern multilingual workplace ' , EAIE Forum , vol. Summer Forum , pp. 34-36 . <
<https://www.eaie.org/our-resources/library/publication/Forum-Magazine/2020-summer-forum.html>
>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/319720>

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PREPARING FOR THE MODERN MULTILINGUAL WORKPLACE



For the 21st-century workplace, one language simply isn't enough. That's the idea behind the University of Helsinki's bilingual Bachelor's degree programmes, which since 2010 have been giving graduates a linguistic edge over the global competition.

Multilingual skills and smooth intercultural communication continue to be among the most important assets not only for the labour market but for all participation in future societies and economies. At the University of Helsinki, we are working on a research project, PEDAMO, that aims to shed light on the professional assets that bilingual Bachelor's degrees can provide to the internationalised labour market, especially in Finland and Scandinavia.

What kind of linguistic skills are considered important by bilingual students who are entering working life in the 21st century? Our project focuses on developing teaching, instruction and guidance for linguistically asymmetrical student groups at our university. The results presented here are based on recent interview data with students.

BILINGUAL DEGREES

Finland is a multilingual country, with Finnish and Swedish its two main official languages. To promote multilingual values in academia and society and to guarantee a sufficient number of bilingual professionals, the University of Helsinki introduced bilingual programmes, known as TvEx, to eight different disciplines in 2010. The idea and execution of the TvEx degree programmes is a unique strategy and has generally received positive feedback from students.

On these degree programmes, in disciplines including biology, chemistry, physics and law, students take a third of the course in Finnish and a third in Swedish. The remaining third is up to them. The aim is not to create fully bilingual academic experts but to enable students to be highly functional professionals in both national languages.



Illustration: Shutterstock

Before graduation, students' written and oral skills are tested: they submit a portfolio and participate in an oral test conducted by a language teacher. These tasks are assessed on the Common European

first-year law student reports: "Although I am only in the beginning of my studies, I am not worried that I could graduate without skills in English. I would be very disappointed if I would not be able to

business life and even in everyday life, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish have retained their importance at all levels of Scandinavian society. The common working language in many Scandinavian companies is English, but informal meetings such as coffee table discussions and dinner conversations are still held in the local languages.

It is also quite common for speakers of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish to speak their own native tongue to each other, relying on the mutual intelligibility between the languages. For Finnish speakers, this means that in order to truly integrate into Scandinavian work and social life, they need sufficient skills in Swedish for the purpose of smooth communication in informal contexts.

The TvEx bilingual degrees are based on the idea of gaining academic expertise in Finnish and Swedish, enabling students

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Framework of Reference for Languages scale; in order to receive the bilingual diploma, the students need to reach the level of C1 in their weaker language.

The University of Helsinki also offers a broad palette of teaching in English, which is appreciated by both domestic and visiting students. English is seen as a mandatory language that students absorb 'naturally' during their studies – or as one

work professionally in English after three and a half years of studies." Since Swedish and Finnish are spoken by relatively small populations in the world, good skills in English are not only an asset but a prerequisite for students' future careers.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Although English is a prioritised language of communication in Scandinavian

as future professionals to work in their one field fluently in two languages. Being fluent in Swedish enables students to find work in the wider Scandinavian jobs market. And this is exactly what our data shows: the main reason students enrol in the bilingual degrees is their well-articulated ambition to be able to work fluently in both Finnish and Swedish. Bilingual degree students, according to our interviews, want to develop language skills in their weaker language so that they can work professionally in both. One student, for example, says that in job interviews she wants to be brave enough to say: “I speak good Swedish and I can work in Swedish, even if I am completely Finnish-speaking.”

What we have learned from our preliminary data analysis is that listening, reading, writing and attending lectures in the weaker language are not enough to acquire bilingual skills suited to future labour markets. Students need to establish a sense of belonging and a



explicit language practices such as judicial terminology and linguistic style. Law students often work in real, professional settings simultaneously with their studies, helping them to acquire knowledge about

are required to reach, is almost native, but students themselves might interpret professional use as being able to speak the weaker language at fully native level. When obtaining more self-confidence in their professional performance, the students eventually come to realise that their linguistic expertise is not judged normatively and that they do not necessarily have to reach any abstract ‘native’ level.

These observations on language competence and the possible paths towards it are only a first stepping stone for the PEDAMO project. We aim to contribute much more to the discussion about why and how multilingualism and linguistic expertise should be an essential part of preparations for professional life in the 21st century and beyond.

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Students need to establish a sense of belonging and a social identity in both language groups in order to build bilingual expertise

social identity in both language groups in order to build bilingual expertise. Interestingly, this seems to be especially important for Finnish-speaking students who previously had little or no contact with Swedish-speaking students.

PROFESSIONAL USE

Another important finding of our research so far is the way law students comprehend the importance of mastering

what kind of expertise might be expected from them in the future. This working experience gained in the professional environment is a clear motivation to ensure future bilingual expertise.

Finally, our PEDAMO project stresses another important feature of gaining linguistic skills: the persistent scrutiny of what kind of language competence is ‘good enough’. The C1 level in the weaker language, which students